

Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute

How Parents, Caregivers, and Family Can Help

Reassure Your Children

Let your children know that they are safe. This may have to be said many times, even after the storm has ended and the floods have gone. Help them share their worries. Give them realistic information. Be comforting but truthful with questions and when talking about the disaster's impact on your family. Also, try to calm worries about the safety of their friends. Let your children know that their friends' parents are taking care of them, just like you are caring for your children. When possible, help them stay in contact with friends.

Remember to Take Care of Yourself

In order to help your child, you must first take care of yourself. Even very young children can sense when their parent or caregiver is upset. Take action to support your health and ability to cope. Make sure you are eating well, sleeping well, and getting proper medical care. Seek and provide support to other parents and caregivers. Avoid making any life-changing choices right after the disaster. Finally, give yourself a break. Try not to overdo cleanup after the storm.

Be a Role Model

If you stay calm during hectic times, it will help your children. Changes in living conditions – even short-term ones – can be very stressful for children. They will take their cues from you on how to respond. Let your children know that they can be upset about something that has happened. Calmly share your feelings, and talk about how you are handling them. The amount you share and the detail you give should be for their benefit, not yours. And you should adjust what you share based on your children's age and level of development. Show concern towards others who have been affected. This can give your children ideas for how to help others.

Talk to Your Children About What Happened and Listen to Their Response

Spend time talking with your children to help them clearly understand the situation. Encourage them to ask questions and express their concerns. Provide a safe place for them to express their fears. Allow them to cry or be sad. Don't expect them to be brave or tough. The goal is to help them understand the situation and their feelings enough to figure out the best way to cope.

What is best varies by age and level of development:

- When talking to a young child, provide concrete examples of what happened and how it will affect them. But reassure them that they are safe. Share signs of hope by letting them know who is helping recover from the disaster (firefighters, police, electric company, builders). Share the steps you are taking to continue to keep them safe.

- Older children and youth want more information – this can be very helpful and you should follow their lead. In order to guide the conversation, ask them what they know about the event. Find out what they are hearing at school. Ask them what questions or concerns they have. Let your children know what they can expect next.

Talk About the Community's Recovery

Reassure children that things are being done to restore electricity and water. Let them know people are working to remove debris. Explain to them that families are getting help to find long-term housing.

Keep Things Hopeful

Even in the most difficult situations, it is important to be hopeful for the future. Show your children the positive things that are happening. A positive and hopeful outlook helps children see the good things in the world around them. This outlook can help them get through the most challenging times.

Give Your Children Extra Time and Attention

They will need your close personal involvement to feel safe and secure. As you can, try to spend extra time with your child and stay connected. Talk, play, cuddle, and listen. Find time to engage in special activities. And tell your children they are loved.

Encourage Your Children

Help your children take care of themselves. Encourage them to get appropriate rest, exercise, and food. Be sure there is a balance of quiet and physical activities.

Monitor Adult Conversations

Be aware of what you and other adults say about the disaster and its effects. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened about things they do not understand. Limit their information to things that are appropriate to their age.

Limit Media Exposure

It is important to keep your child from seeing too many distressing images of the hurricane. Images of the disaster and the damage can be very frightening. These images can trigger fears of it happening again. Younger children may even fear that events they see on the television are actually happening over and over again. Older children and youth, though, may find that some factual media reports help them understand the disaster. However, intense and ongoing coverage can have negative effects on older children, youth, and even adults.

Maintain Family Rules and Expectations

Stick with family rules about good behavior and respect for others. However, be patient and understanding when enforcing them. Children may be more distracted, stressed, or angry. They may need a little extra patience, attention, and reminders. They may also need extra help with chores or homework once school is back in session.

Establish New Routines

Even in the midst of chaos and change, children feel more safe and secure with structure and routine. To the best of your ability, set and stick to daily routines for bedtime and meal time. Children feel more comfortable when they know what to expect.

Reduce Boredom

Many children may complain they are bored. They are unable to watch television, play video games, or play with their friends like they did before the storm. Likewise, they are unable to play sports or pursue other interests. Helping children think of other activities during this time will be important.

Give Support at Bedtime

Children may be anxious at bedtime when they are separated from you. Spend more time with them at bedtime doing things like reading a story. It is okay to let your child sleep with you for a reasonable amount of time. However, be sure to let them know they will go back to normal sleeping arrangements.

Help Children See the Good that Can Come Alongside a Disaster

Adults can help children see the good that comes alongside a disaster. Talk about heroic actions, families and friends who help, and support from neighbors and people from far away. Encourage children to help. Children recover and cope better with a disaster if they feel they are helping others. It can give them a sense of control, security, and empathy.

Be Alert for Significant Changes

Be aware of changes in sleeping patterns, eating habits, focus, wide emotional swings, or frequent physical complaints without a clear sign of illness. These changes will likely decrease within a short time. But if they last, seek professional support and treatment.